

## Different paths to a common goal: Preparing students for civic life

*By Brady Delander and Maria Millard*

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While many Americans might agree on the importance of preparing young people for citizenship in a democracy, civic education has been in decline. Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress show students across all grade levels have a less-than-adequate grasp of the skills and knowledge necessary to engage as citizens.

In response, a number of states have taken a variety of approaches to promote and advance civics education – with and without legislation – by instituting the following:

- [Mandated task forces](#)
- [Accountability structures and mandated assessments for civics](#)
- [Statewide initiatives](#)
- [Administrative directives](#)
- [Initiatives of secretaries of state](#)

In recent months, the National Center for Civic Learning and Engagement, part of the Education Commission of the States, has explored each of these bullet points in short reports. This report, the sixth and final in the series, explores the similarities of these efforts around the country.

Some recurring themes became clear. A collaborative approach is crucial and, while not always easy, there are ways to work within financial and political constraints. In general, successful policymaking for civic education requires broad support through a goal-oriented, non-partisan and collaborative approach. While states' civic education efforts come in a rich variety, the goals of these civic initiatives are the same: to ensure that all students are ready for college, career *and* civic life.

### ***Key Takeaways***

- Civic education initiatives can be accomplished through legislation or other means.
- Successful initiatives require collaboration, coalition-building and persistence.
- Strong leadership is crucial in creating lasting programs.
- Acknowledging the importance of readiness for college, career *and* civic life is a necessary precursor to strengthening civic education.

## What's been accomplished

### *Mandated task forces*

Several state legislatures have appointed task forces to study potential improvements in civic education: **Massachusetts, Illinois, Virginia, Alaska** and **Oregon**, among many others. Mandating task forces via legislation underscores the attention given to civic education. The declared goals are similar across the task forces – to analyze the condition of civic knowledge in schools and make recommendations for improvement.

### *Accountability models*

While many states have developed content standards in civics or government, only two states have attached consequences for students and schools based on required civics assessments: **Florida** and **Tennessee**. Although their approaches vary, both states count student performance on civics exams toward a school's state rating.

### *Statewide initiatives*

Two states, **Illinois** and **Florida**, have made significant efforts – without legislation – to create a network of academic institutions committed to civics education. Illinois' [Democracy Schools](#) are high schools recognized by the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition for their commitment to civic learning. The Florida College System [Civics Literacy Initiative](#) provides civics education opportunities for postsecondary students and the communities in which they live.

### *Administrative directives*

Some state officials – including superintendents of public education and chief justices – have used their authority, rather than legislation, to more quickly advance civics education initiatives and programs. Among its many charges, [The California Task Force on K-12 Civic Learning](#) made recommendations intended to improve overall civic skills and dispositions in the state. In **Montana**, the [Civic Education Institute](#) was designed as a two-day professional development experience for every secondary social studies and civics teacher in the state.

### *Initiatives of secretaries of state*

Secretaries of state, though not typically involved in education policy, can play an important role in bolstering civic education. As the chief elections officers, many secretaries of state view support of voter education and participation as their public duties. Their efforts help to educate students, teachers and voters, among others, and can have a lasting impact beyond their time spent in office.

## Common themes, differing approaches

### *Variety of options*

As highlighted by the five reports above, there are many paths to promote civic learning and knowledge. Importantly, these efforts can be accomplished with or without legislation. For example, a handful of states created legislatively mandated task forces while others took an administrative approach to form a similar body.

Some initiatives were relatively grand in scope and scale – assessment and accountability structures in Florida and Tennessee – and others were fairly simple and straightforward – providing online resources

and information. Big or small, every approach was designed with the intention to draw attention to civic education.

### **Approaches**

Not every state and policymaker will be in the same position with regard to their political and fiscal capacity to move forward with regards to civic education. The models identified in this series provide a sense of what's possible in several different circumstances.

For example, in California, Chief Justice Tani G. Cantil-Sakauye and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson solicited outside funding to create a regional task force. While there are costs involved, no public funds were needed. Many secretaries of state have found low-cost methods to boost civics by offering online resources and toolkits. More formal approaches such as state mandated task forces and the work done in Florida and Tennessee, where civics became part of statewide testing and students and schools were held accountable for civic knowledge, may be better suited for institutionalizing civic education over the long run. These initiatives, however, often come at some cost to taxpayers.

### **Coalition-building**

Arguably the most important aspect to the advancement of civic education is the task of generating support and some level of excitement – from legislators, educators, civics professionals and even the public at large. The idea of guiding the people to become more-engaged citizens is a popular, non-partisan concept.

In Tennessee, it took more than a decade of brainstorming, gatherings and prodding to reach the end result of a law that included a project-based assessment that all of the state's students must participate in and pass twice – once in grades 4 through 8 and again in high school. The regional California task force, again, is another example of like-minded individuals joining forces to accomplish a goal.

### **Persistence**

Significant change takes time and persistence. In Massachusetts, for example, the commission on civic education was first established in 2008. Three years later the commission was renewed and the second iteration of the task force produced an expansive report with recommendations. Sometimes it takes several attempts to achieve the desired result. The champions for civics education highlighted in these reports all persevered through challenges and obstacles. Without such a commitment, their initiatives would not have come to life.

## **Conclusion**

As this brief demonstrates, policymakers and education leaders who wish to strengthen civic education have many approaches available to them. Initiatives can come as a result of legislation but can also be impactful when originated outside of the legislature. The strategy a state may use depends upon its needs and the will of its actors. Often success is contingent on the process and all that goes with it – transparency, bipartisan support and common goals, among others. While innovative leaders can drive change, a collection of supports are needed to sustain and contribute to promoting readiness for college, career *and* civic life.

## Authors

*Brady Delander is a researcher for the National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement at the Education Commission of the States. He can be reached at [bdelander@ecs.org](mailto:bdelander@ecs.org). Maria Millard is a policy analyst at the Education Commission of the States. She can be reached at [mmillard@ecs.org](mailto:mmillard@ecs.org).*

## About the series

*This is the sixth and final brief in a series of reports examining state initiatives related to civic education:*

*Florida and Tennessee: Accountability in Civic Education, March 2014*

*States Address Civics with Mandated Task Forces, May 2014*

*Florida and Illinois: Civics Initiatives, No Law Required, June 2014*

*Advancing Civic Learning with Administrative Authority, June 2014*

*Secretaries of state make impact, lasting impression in civics, June 2014*

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